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How sleep affects our skin

By Lori Stryker

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Sleep is a "natural, temporary loss of consciousness" (Robinson, 1941) necessary for our bodies to build up energy reserves and regenerate body cells and tissues. During sleep, the heart beats more slowly, breathing becomes slower, growth hormones peak, muscles relax and body temperature lowers. Newborn infants sleep almost continuously, gradually decreasing their need for sleep. In early childhood, 12 to 13 hours of sleep are generally required and this amount decreases to approximately 8 hours in adulthood. After the age of 50, sleep is often characterized by frequent night time awakenings, shorter dream lengths and less overall sleep (Bricklen, 1990).

Many consider sleep to be of low priority among the many daily activities engaged in. It is estimated that the world's population is depriving itself of one less hour of sleep per night than is needed (Awake!, 2004). Despite this view of night-time rest, sleep is a necessary, sophisticated process regulated by the brain. Operating as a 24-hour clock, chemical substances, such as melatonin, are released in the body to trigger sleepiness. There are two main stages of sleep classified according to eye movement. The first is REM or rapid eye movement which is a shallow, dream-filled sleep. There are four sub-stages within REM sleep. The first sub-stage lasts 30 seconds to 7 minutes, and during this time the muscles relax while the brain produces irregular wave activity. The second sub-stage lasts 20 percent of the night and brain waves become larger as the body is asleep. The next sub-stage is called delta sleep, where growth hormones peak, and cell and tissue repair take place. Without delta sleep, which accounts for half of a night's sleep, one will feel tired the next day. Every 90 minutes the brain enters the dream sub-stage, where brain wave activity is similar in pattern to being awake, but muscles are not able to move as when awake. This stage lengthens each repeated cycle during the night, and is crucial to preserving mental health and long term memory, since the brain sorts through short term memory and 'deletes' unimportant data. The second major stage of sleep is non-REM, or non rapid eye movement, where blood pressure drops and heart rate slows as the person enters a deep sleep.

Short term sleep deprivation causes little physical harm, since the body compensates for the lack of sleep by increasing its adrenaline levels during the day. The body also attempts to get more sleep at a later time. A temporary shift in attitude may occur, such as feelings of pessimism or negativity (Bricklin, 1990). Sleep deprivation, even short term, can be dangerous if driving a car, or operating machinery.

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Sleep deprivation is thought to be the cause of half of all traffic fatalities on U.S. highways, and being awake 17 to 19 hours can cause the same limited reaction and ability as having a 0.05 percent blood alcohol limit (Awake! 2004). It is also implicated in many workplace accidents.

Chronic sleep deprivation, which is caused by prolonged shortages of sleep, can lead to paranoia or hallucinations. This is also termed 'sleep debt', and is characterized by irregular sleep patterns that do not allow the body to enter delta sleep. This can bring on a short attention span, memory and vocabulary loss as well as other symptoms. Among women aged 25–50 who tend to be "perfectionists", many tend to suffer from shallow sleep as the wake centre of the brain remains active when it should be relatively inactive. Other complications from sleep deprivation include obesity, premature aging, fatigue, chronic memory loss and increased risk for diabetes, infection, cardiovascular disease and gastrointestinal disease. It is important, therefore, to obtain an adequate amount of sleep each night,

since sleep also helps the body metabolize free radicals, which are thought to accelerate aging and cancerous growths.

Obtaining a good night's rest can be achieved. The following are suggestions to help towards the goal of night–time rest:

Avoid stimulants like caffeinated drinks before bed.

Avoid eating a heavy meal at night. A light snack might help if hunger causes you to wake up at night. Create a pleasant, warm (body temperature drops when sleepy), noise–free bedroom with a comfortable mattress and pillow.

Avoid exercise before bed, however, regular exercise during the day aids sleep.

Avoid activities that increase anxiety, such as considering financial matters or discussing serious problems before bed.

If possible, a quick daytime nap lasting 20 to 30 minutes can impart positive physiological benefits.

Prolonged naps impair sleep at night and may cause insomnia.

If experiencing insomnia, try getting up and engaging in another activity for a brief time and then attempt sleep again.

A warm glass of milk contains tryptophan, a natural substance thought to aid sleep.

Keep the bedroom dark, since the area of the brain which controls the sleep cycle is close to the optic nerves and thus sensitive to light (feeling awake) and dark (feeling sleepy).

Quit smoking, which increases blood pressure, heart rate and brain wave activity.

How can you know if you are a healthy sleeper?

Sleep comes easily at night.

You rarely wake up during the night and can fall back asleep with ease.

You wake at the same time each morning without an alarm.

You feel alert during the day and do not feel the need to nap.

Getting a good night's rest refreshes the body, mind and attitude. It is as vital to our health as good food and exercise. The phrase "beauty rest" is more than a quaint idea, it is a fundamental task in the quest for external and internal beauty.

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Lori Stryker has been researching and developing all natural skin care and make-up for the purpose of offering men and women safe natural cosmetics for everyday use. She brings to her research a specialist in human biology from the University of Toronto, coupled with a professional home economics degree and an education degree from the University of British Columbia, fusing chemical and biological knowledge with food family and textile sciences.

Beauty Tips: 10 Steps for Radiant Skin

By Sheila Dicks

Although there are many skin care products to choose from if you fail to take proper care of your skin all the products in the world won't give you a radiant complexion. When it comes to a glowing complexion what we put into our bodies and how we treat our skin and ourselves has a huge impact on how we look - no skin care product can overcome certain damage. Here are a few hints to take the best care of your skin and get that radiant glow.

Eat a balanced diet - what we put in our bodies will show on our skin. If you eat fatty foods and junk your skin will reflect that, so give your skin proper nutrition.

Get at least 7 to 8 hours sleep every night. A lack of sleep will show up under your eyes as dark circles or bags. Proper rest will also benefit your body and your life.

Drink 6 to 8 glasses of water a day to keep your skin hydrated. It is best to spread the consumption of water in small amounts over the course of the day to be sure it is properly absorbed.

Maintain a regular exercise schedule. Exercise gets the blood moving and creates a healthy body.

Get lots of fresh air but avoid prolonged exposure to wind and cold.

Avoid the sun and tanning beds. The damage done by ultraviolet rays is long lasting and cannot be reversed.

Always wear sunglasses to avoid squinting.

Try to achieve a well-balanced life and reduce stress.

Exfoliate twice a week to rid your skin of dead cells.

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Develop a skin care routine for your particular skin type.

If you have been neglecting your complexion start right away to improve it - it's never too late. What you do today will show up in your skin in the future. It's all up to you.

Sheila Dicks is a wardrobe and image consultant who teaches women how to look slimmer by dressing to suit their body type. Visit her at

to download a copy of her

e-book Image Makeovers and get How to Build a Wardrobe free.

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